ELSAH HISTORY

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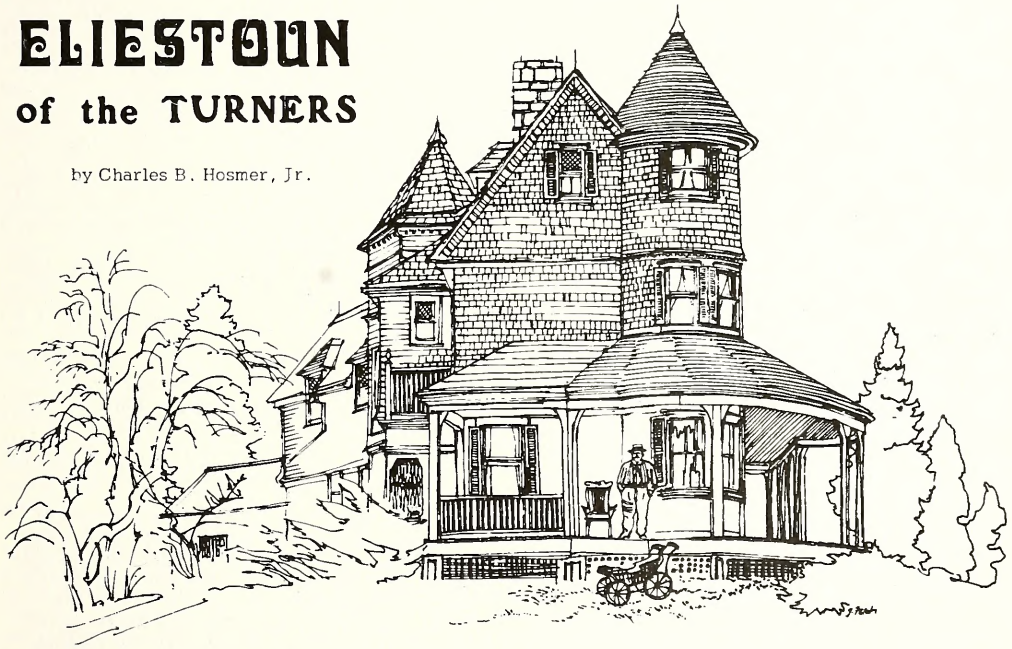
ELIESTOUN of the TURNERS

by Charles B. Hosmer, Jr.

A simple reference in the deed books for Jersey County dated May 25, 1888, opens a new era for the neighborhood around Elsah. Henry S. Turner, Jr., of St. Louis purchased 422 acres from William F. Leonard for the princely sum of $10,000. What appears to be an ordinary business transaction marked the formation of an estate that was to include over 600 acres of farmland with a mansion, attendant outbuildings and a park with exotic landscaping. The results of this great building project are still with us today as a scenic portion of the Principia College campus. Travelers who view the Jersey County bluffland from the Mississippi River or from the air will note the mansion at Eliestoun as the most prominent feature of the countryside.

Henry Turner was not merely a wealthy St. Louisan who had selected a fine piece of property at random. He was a product of a social system that made it natural and possible for him to build a mansion at the age of 28 on a large and productive farm.



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Although he listed himself in directories as a "capitalist," Turner derived his fortune from an inheritance that came to him when he graduated from Georgetown University in 1880. That year his father Henry S. Turner died and left him a substantial life income, possibly as high as $10,000 a year. In October of 1883 Henry Turner, Jr., married Ada Ames, the daughter of Lucy Virginia Semple Ames, at Notchclif. The wedding party came to Elsah on the steamer Spread Eagle to witness the union of two prominent St. Louis families. Newspaper coverage of the Ames-Turner marriage ceremony included extensive descriptions of Mrs. Ames' gardens and house, as well as the text of the marriage contract.

It was natural for a young man who wanted to become a gentleman farmer to look around the countryside above Elsah once he had become a member of the family that owned most of the land that surrounded the village. From time to time the Ames family summered in the East, either at Bar Harbor, Maine, or at Rye Beach, New Hampshire. On one of these trips Turner met Alexander Wadsworth Longfellow, a nephew of the poet. Young Longfellow had just gone into the practice of architecture after spending four years in the offices of Henry Hobson Richardson, the most influential architect in America at that time. Probably the two young men concluded that the spectacular view from the Elsah bluffs called for the kind of shingled resort building that was common along the shores of New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Longfellow had a partner in Pittsburgh who must have taken on the direct supervision of the project along with the hiring of a landscape architect. Turner decided to call the property "Eliestoun" in honor of his wife's family. Mrs. Turner's grandfather, James Semple, had named Elsah after a rock in the Firth of Clyde in Scotland. It seemed fitting to refer to the new house as a castle, known in Scotland as "Elliestoun Tower" on Castle Semple Loch.

Possibly young Turner looked upon himself as a medieval baron looking over a hostile world from his fortified manor house. His daughter later referred to Turner as "very proud of being self-sufficient and able to withstand any siege of no matter what duration." Several of the columnists who reported on the construction of Eliestoun mentioned that the house reminded them of "one of the old castles on the Rhine."

Whatever the motives may have been in the construction program, Henry Turner set about the supervision of his estate with remarkable directness. He was able to engage the services of Ernest F. Gehlman, an experienced Springfield contractor. This choice made perfect sense in an era when Elsah's only regular communications with the outside world consisted of a railroad that ran between Grafton and Springfield daily. There was no rail connection with St. Louis. The Jerseyville and Alton newspapers show that the project moved along about as swiftly as one could expect with the technology of the 1880's. The foundation was completed in October of 1889, and by April of 1890 the painters were in the final stages of decorating the interior of the house. The Turners moved into their new summer residence in April with their five-year old son Edgar Ames Turner. As the work progressed reporters noted that a carload of evergreens arrived and that Henry Turner was experimenting with planting young maple trees in clumps that would cause the trunks to join and form one large tree trunk. The columnists did not hesitate to refer to Eliestoun with adjectives like "palatial" and "fine."

In spite of the aristocratic setting designed for the Turner family, the new gentleman farmer quickly endeared himself to local businessmen. On June 26, 1890 the Jersey County Democrat editor commented, "He is a very pleasant gentleman and in our opinion will become popular with the Jersey County people in proportion to the acquaintances he forms. He purchased the James E. Starr farm about three years ago, and is engaged in improving and stocking it with the best blooded cattle and sheep to be had in the country. The beautiful residence he has erected this spring is the most elegant in point of finish of any house in this part of the country. The fact that Mr. Turner is an earnest admirer of Cleveland and Wike, makes him at home with Jersey County Democrats." Within a few years Henry Turner took charge of the sheep department at the Jersey County Fair. He continued to enjoy the praise of the local journalists over the years. They nearly always referred to him as a very pleasant companion and a thorough gentleman.

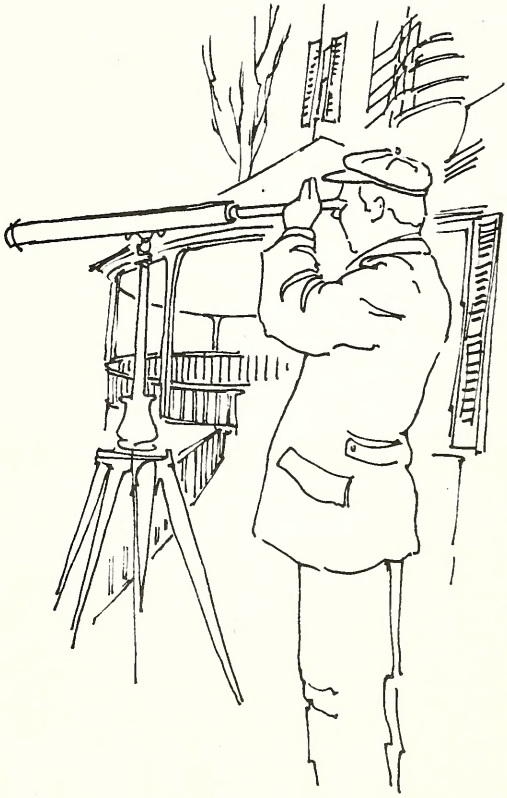
During the first half of the 1890's Henry Turner worked on the improvement of his estate. During 1891, for example, he constructed a superintendent's house and spent a fair amount of time in the fall drilling a well that could bring water to a house that was hundreds of feet above the banks of the Mississippi. His efforts were crowned with success in November when the drillers struck good water at 900 feet. There was insufficient pressure to bring the flow to the surface, so Turner installed a windmill to bring the water to a point where it could be hand-pumped into a lead tank in the attic of the house. There was no electricity for the house, so the Turners depended upon oil lamps for illumination. There were other difficulties that had to be surmounted in order to turn Eliestoun into a proper estate for a gentleman. The road from Beltrees had to be paved with gravel in order to bring the guests to the farm from the nearest railroad station. This road-building operation required a great deal of care.

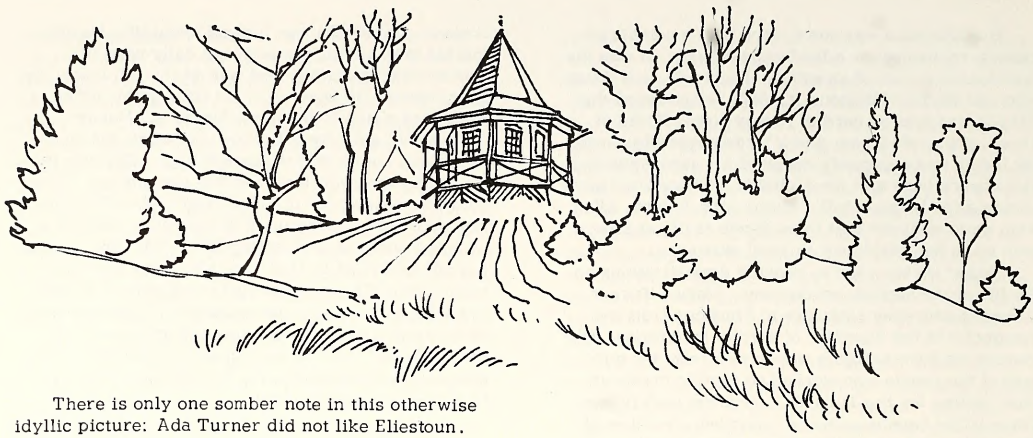
But Eliestoun was much more than a notable architectural project or a landscape setting. It was the functioning center of an estate. Marion Turner Allen, who was born at Eliestoun in 1892, remembered that "There was a large herd of Jersey cows, flocks of sheep, pigs, chickens, and a large vegetable garden. My father was especially proud of his asparagus and strawberry beds and the orchards. There were many horses and always a half a dozen dogs." Mrs. Allen went on to comment that these facets of life at Eliestoun made her childhood an ideal existence.

Today we are used to viewing dramatizations on the life of the English aristocracy. Marion Turner looked at everyday existence at Eliestoun from the standpoint of the daughter of a great landowner. Obviously we have to find a way to re-create the outlook of the people who worked so hard to create an ideal setting for the Turners. Over the past fifteen years it has been possible to interview a number of Elsah residents who remember working for the Turners during the thirty years that the family occupied Eliestoun as a summer residence. While we cannot give a complete picture of a working day at the mansion, there are important indications of a life-style quite different from our own.

When the Turner family was in residence at Eliestoun they usually enjoyed the services of a cook, two maids for cleaning the house, a farm superintendent and five men to work on the grounds during the summer. In the winter the staff narrowed to three people working on the farm and the park area within the stone gates. A coachman slept in the stable, and the superintendent remained all year in the farmhouse. During the 1890's Marion Turner had the services of a French governess, and in later years Eva Reintges, a resident of Elsah, helped out as a companion for the Turner daughter. When the Turners had house guests they found it necessary to hire extra people to drive carriages from the Beltrees railroad station, and the kitchen staff increased in size as well. It is obvious from the size of the establishment maintained by Henry Turner that Eliestoun was an important factor in the Elsah employment situation.

The Turner family set out to enjoy the leisure created by the staff at Eliestoun. Letters, family photographs, and taped interviews give us some idea of the country life of the well-to-do. We know that Eliestoun was ideal for small house parties. There were only a few rooms for guests, but there were frequent gatherings during the spring and summer. We know that some of the parties went hunting and others chose to ride around the estate. Photographs lead us to believe that they enjoyed sitting on the veranda with telescopes looking out over the river. Eliestoun was equipped with a nine-hole golf course in the later years of the Turner occupancy. Some guests played a form of lawn tennis and others chose croquet. Henry Turner himself spent time inspecting his farm operations and took daily naps in a pagoda-shaped gazebo that was on the hill below the main house. He stopped in his little gothic office at least once a month to pay the workers. Marion Turner had a happy childhood, although she must have been lonely on her Elsah hilltop. She was indulged by the servants when her parents were away, sometimes eating fairly late at night. Eva Reintges remembered dressing up with Marion to simulate a wedding with the cook acting as the minister. Marion herself remarked in later years that she loved the quiet life at Eliestoun with the diversions that were available to her. All the residents of Eliestoun were able to enjoy the fishpond near the entrance to the park. At one time the pond had been stocked with goldfish, and sometimes the Turners kept beavers in a mound near the water.





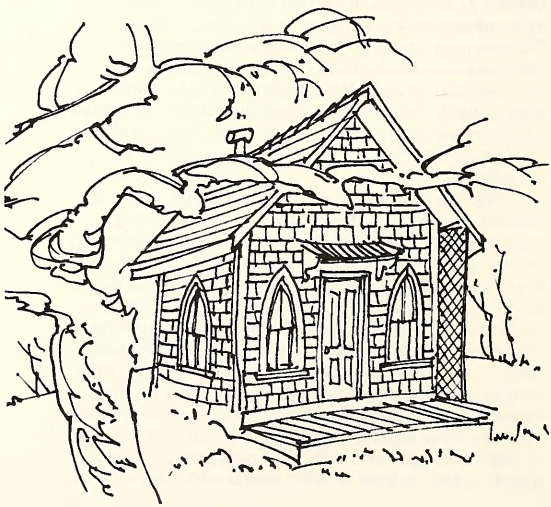
There is only one somber note in this otherwise idyllic picture: Ada Turner did not like Eliestoun. Although her photographs give us a great deal of important information about the estate, she did not come often and she did not hide her feelings about the place. When Henry Turner died in 1921 she sold the farm almost immediately. Residents of Elsah found Henry Turner gracious and friendly, but they did not find Mrs. Turner as easy to get to know. Although there is not much indication about the kind of relationship that Henry Turner had with his awesome mother-in-law, Lucy Semple Ames, she appears in many family photographs taken at Eliestoun. They must have visited each other frequently because a road did join Notchcliff with Eliestoun. Probably Turner and Mrs. Ames were able to get along fairly well because their life styles seem to have been similar.

Today, after two changes in ownership, the Eliestoun estate remains in a good state of preservation. Only an individual equipped with photographs and a good deal of information can enjoy the scanty physical remains of Notchcliff. Eliestoun offers the visitor splendid views of the river valley and many indications of the relaxed atmosphere of the home of a wealthy St. Louis family. In later issues of the newsletter we hope to explore the evolution of the Eliestoun area under the Blythe family and the renovation of the house as the home of Principia's president. In addition the Eliestoun puzzle has been the impetus for an extended research project that could help others in their quest for historical information. The shingle-style vacation home of the Turners remains a useful and ornamental building on the campus of Principia College. It still gives us clear evidence of a world that has long since vanished under the changes that have occurred in our society over the past fifty years. With the exception of the Gate Lodge, Eliestoun is our last visible reminder of the family that founded Elsah and preserved its wooded surroundings for over seventy years.

House Tour

SPECIAL TOUR OF ELIESTOUN

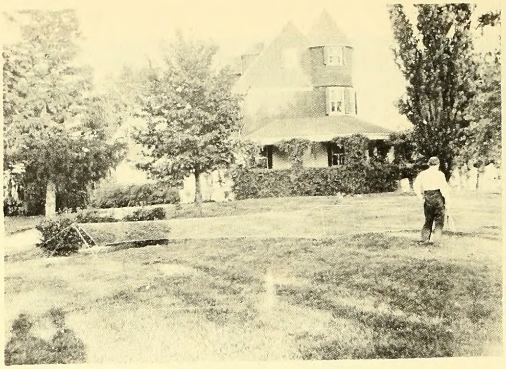
Historic Elsah Foundation is very pleased to offer a guided tour of Eliestoun conducted by Professor Charles Hosmer on Saturday, December 27, 1980. There will be two tour groups--one at 4 pm and one at 5 pm. Slides will be shown and refreshments served. Admission will be $1.00 per person. Do join us and re-live Eliestoun of the Turners!
If possible, please make reservations by calling 374-2608 or mailing in to HEF, Box 117, Elsah, IL 62028.



(16) A typical Turner house party on the veranda at Eliestoun on May 12, 1895. Edgar Ames Turner is in the left corner. The front row from left to right: Miss Emily Semple, Mrs. George Paschall holding Marion Turner, Mrs. Thomas Turner, Miss Marian Lindsay, Mrs. Mary Cushman. Second row: Henry Semple Ames, George Paschall, Miss Margot Quatiemain, Henry Smith Turner, Jr.

AN ELSAH ALBUM

FALL 1980

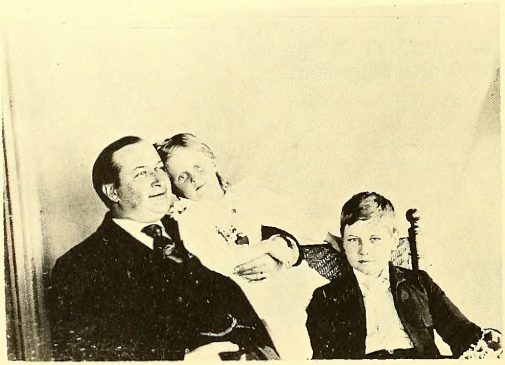


(17) Playing lawn tennis on the west side of Eilliestoun around 1910.

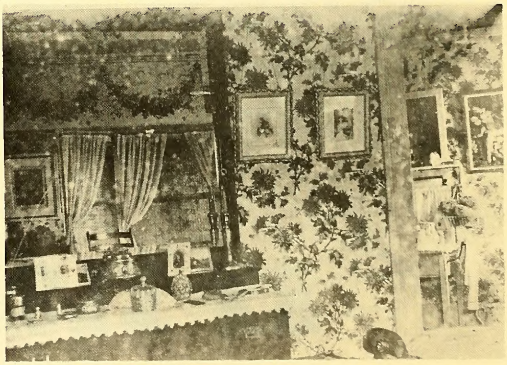
(18) The north end of the library at Eliestoun, February 18, 1894.

(19) A coach with horses in front of Eliestoun, around 1910.

(20) The mantel in Mrs. Turner's bedroom, February 18, 1894.



(21) Henry Turner with Marion and Edgar on the veranda at Eliestoun, April 28, 1895.



(22) The dressing table and a glimpse of the dressing room just off from Mrs. Turner's bedroom, February 18, 1894.

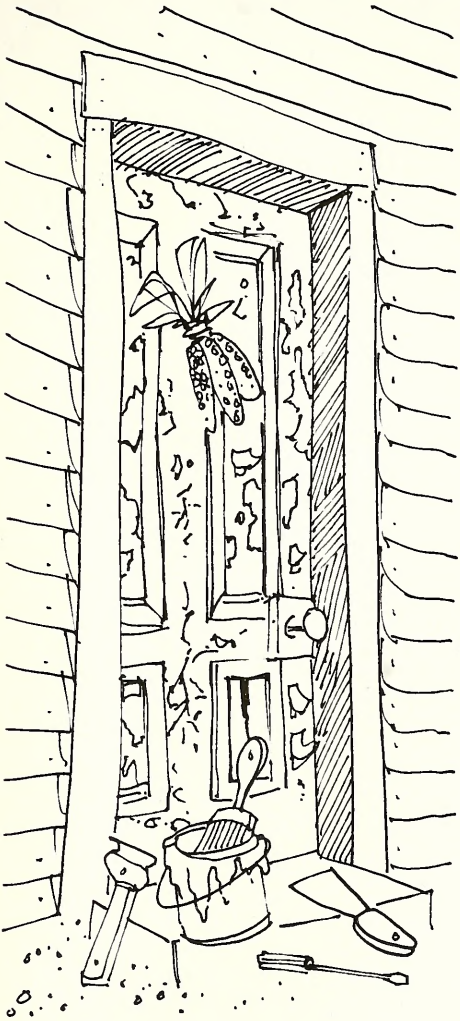
(23) A group on a porch, possibly at Notchcliff. Left to right standing: Miss Bradford, Mrs. Mary Cushman, Henry S. Turner, Mrs. Ada Turner. Mrs. Ames is seated with her dog. Taken around 1910.

(24) A party in the dining room at Eliestoun around 1910. Left to right around the table: Henry Cushman, a child (hidden), Mrs. Ada Ames Turner, a maid, Katharine Floyd Jones, Marion Turner, Mrs. Mary Ames Cushman.

(25) Ada Ames Turner taken around the time of her wedding in 1883.

(26) West view from the veranda at Eliestoun, July 2, 1893.

THE VILLAGE CONSERVE



(Have a question regarding restoration, suppliers, or other items of historical nature? Write: Mary Ann Pitchford, Historic Elsah Foundation, Elsah, IL 62028.)

by Mary Ann Pitchford

PROBLEM: We recently purchased a circa-1840 farmhouse in the St. Charles area. The kitchen door is a four-plank (vertical) door covered with many layers of chipped paint. All the paint detracts from the detail of the door, plus there is a 1/8" split about 9" long.

S.J., St. Charles, Missouri

SOLUTION: I am assuming this is an exterior door leading from the kitchen. All the paint must be removed from the door either by using chemical strippers or by burning. If you have never burned paint off, I suggest for this project using the chemical stripper. The semi-paste brands are the least messy.

Once the door is stripped and completely dry, judge for yourself whether it needs to be re-glued. If the door seems sturdy except for the split, gluing will not be necessary. The split was probably caused by age and the door being exposed to the elements over a period of years.

Sand the door until smooth to the touch with medium grade sandpaper. Wipe off with clean cloth to remove any sanded particles. Then take wood putty available at hardware or paint stores and apply with putty knife to the split from both sides. Remove excess with putty knife and allow to dry. Next, going with the grain of the wood, sand the entire door with fine sandpaper and wipe with clean cloth.

Take a mixture of three parts linseed oil to one part turpentine and apply to door with a brush. This will add life to the wood. Once this has soaked in, remove excess by rubbing vigorously with lint-free cloth. Let dry for 24 hours.

The door is now ready for a primer coat of oil paint. Apply this to door, again going with the grain of the wood. Make sure there are no runs, then allow to dry.

You are now ready for the finish coat of paint. Keep in mind not to apply the finish coat with any less care than you have just taken with your door. Make sure the paint is not too thick and use a smaller brush along areas of detail. The door should be an asset to your kitchen area when finished and provide many more years of service and beauty.

ÆSTHETICS/FLEETING

by Mary Ann Pitchford

As members of Historic Elsah Foundation, you have undoubtedly enjoyed the natural beauty to be found along the Great River Road from the Lockhaven area to Grafton. This section of highway ranks as one of the most beautiful in the state and offers wonderful vistas in all seasons. The area was designated in 1965 under President Johnson's administration to be a "national scenic highway." In 1968 and 1969 the State of Illinois signed "scenic easement agreements" with property owners along the highway to insure the natural beauty for generations to come.

At Grafton we have the confluence of the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, which is unique in itself. The Mississippi then lazily travels along bluff lines to Chautauqua, Elsah and then to Lockhaven, all unobstructed by commercialization or industrialization. This section of highway was intended to be enjoyed for its aesthetics. THIS COULD SOON END.

Because of increased river traffic to Lock and Dam 26 at Alton, barge companies are trying to get fleeting (docking) locations adjacent to the Great River Road. One application alone is for 14 tiers of 10 barges each (140 barges). Approximate length of each barge is 75 feet. This would completely block any view of the river, sailing regattas, pleasure craft, etc. This is only one application; there are others pending.

Historic Elsah Foundation, along with a dozen other major organizations in this area and hundreds upon hundreds of individuals, is working diligently in the Chautauqua, Elsah, Principia, Alton area to prevent this fleeting operation from becoming a reality. We feel the "quality of life" along the Mississippi River here would be destroyed.

Besides the scenic values to be considered there are these:

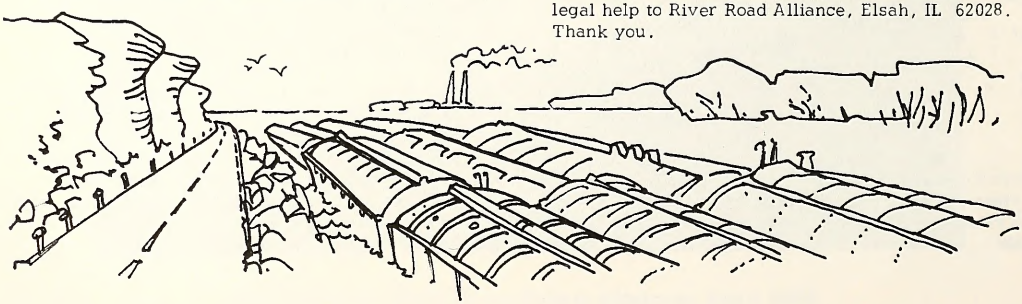
1. Safety factor--Deckhands walk freely through Elsah and Chautauqua at all hours of the night. Neither community has full-time police protection. Principia College has had a security problem on campus with workers on the barges climbing the bluffs to the college.

   Barges which carry dangerous explosive cargoes are left unattended. This would add a burden to the volunteer fire department which protects this area.

2. The proposed fleeting operation is located in a known winter feeding area for the American Bald Eagle. The proposed facility would endanger the feeding area for this specie.

3. Noise pollution--The barge switching operations would continue 24 hours a day, destroying the solitude offered in the above communities.

4. Possible damage to River Road--The Great River Road was built with federal and state tax money. Your tax money went to build and maintain this scenic highway. The highway was built on a sand base. Shall we risk damage done by barge lines deadmen (anchors) driven into the road base? Should our tax dollars go for future repairs possibly caused by these anchors?

There are many other aspects of this fleeting operation which we could cover, but space is limited. We need your support. Historic Elsah Foundation and other organizations are being granted a public hearing before the State of Illinois and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Dec. 18, at 7 pm at Pere Marquette State Park. Since this is a "national scenic highway" anyone can contact the representatives in their state and request help. This is important both before and after the hearing. The defenders of the scenic River Road need to prove that they are able to sustain their campaign of informing all interested parties about the long-term costs of the fleeting proposal.

If you value the opportunity to live in or visit this area please respond with contributions for legal help to River Road Alliance, Elsah, IL 62028. Thank you.